DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 222 249 PS 013 098

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TITLE Patterns of Touching between Preschool Children and Their Parents.
PUB DATE Aug 82
NOTE 13p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Psychological Association (90th, Washington, DC, August 23-27, 1982).

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Behavior Patterns; Fathers; Incidence; Mothers; *Nonverbal Communication; *Parents; *Preschool Children; Preschool Education; *Sex Differences
IDENTIFIERS Dyadic Interaction Analysis; *Tactile Communication

ABSTRACT

Twenty 2- to 5-year-old children were observed during separate play with their mothers and fathers in an attempt to more clearly define patterns of touching. Specific purposes of the study were: (1) to identify the different functions of touch; (2) to determine the frequency of occurrence and duration of different types of touches; (3) to describe patterns of touching by mothers, fathers, boys, and girls; and (4) to describe patterns of touching between same and/or cross sex parent/child pairs. Each participating child came to a laboratory playroom twice, once with each parent. During each visit, the parent and child played with specific toys and read a book together. Play sessions, which were videotaped, lasted 30 minutes. Two coders analyzed all videotapes and recorded instances of touch, coding for type and duration in seconds. Coders also noted who initiated the touch. Categories of touch behavior developed from pilot tapes were utilized; these included comfort, attention, negative touch, help, and "object" (treating the other person as an object). Results are discussed. (RH)

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PATTERNS OF TOUCHING BETWEEN PRESCHOOL CHILDREN AND THEIR PARENTS

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Presented at the American Psychological Association, Washington, D.C., August 1982

PS013098

ABSTRACT

This study was designed to look at the frequency, duration, and reasons for touching between parents and preschool children. Twenty 2 to 5 year old children were observed during play with mothers and fathers separately. Five function categories for touch were devised (comfort or affection; attention; negative touch; helpful touch; and other as object). Frequencies, durations, and functions of touches between parents and children were coded. The results indicated that parents and children touch each other for different reasons. Furthermore, mothers and fathers use touch differently with their sons and daughters. The importance of touch as a means of nonverbal communication and as a tool of socialization are discussed.

Touch is an important, but little understood aspect of nonverbal communication. Traditionally, touching was assumed to be an expression of warmth, comfort, or affection. Nguyen, Heslin, and Nguyen (1975) confirmed that touching is often used to communicate positive emotional messages. Touch may also communicate power or dominance (Henley, 1977). Henley reports that higher status individuals are more likely to touch lower status people than the reverse. Thus, touch can be used to express either positive feelings of warmth, or power and dominance.

Few studies have looked at the patterns of touching between parents and their preschool children. Research on the use of touch between parents and younger children suggests that after the child is 6 months, mothers touch girls more than boys (Clay, 1968; Goldberg & Lewis, 1969). The use of touch from fathers to children has not yet been systematically explored. Perdue & Conner (1978) observed instances of touching between preschool children and both male and female teachers. They found that while teachers were touching girls more, male teachers were touching boys more. This same sex effect questions the assumption that girls are always touched more than boys.

The present study attempts to more clearly define the patterns of touching between both mothers and fathers with their preschool children. It was designed to look at the incidence of touching

between parents and children, and to determine the reasons why parents and children touch each other during play. Specific purposes were: 1. to identify the different functions of touches (e.g., to show affection, etc.); 2. to determine the frequency of occurrence and duration of the different types; 3. to look at patterns of touch by mothers, fathers, boys and girls; and 4. to describe the patterns of touching between same and/or cross sex parent-child pairs.

Method

Subjects were 20 middle-class children, 10 girls and 10 boys, and both their parents. Children ranged in age from 2 to 5 years, with a mean age of 3.4 years.

Procedure - Each child came to a laboratory playroom twice, once with each parent. During each visit, the parent and child played with specific toys and read a book together. The play sessions lasted 30 minutes and were videotaped.

Coding - Pilot tapes were analyzed to develop the categories for types of touches. Touch was defined as physical contact from one person to another. Accidental touches were not included in this analysis. Five major types of touches were present in parent-child play. These were:

1 - comfort - an outright display of affection or care for the other person

2 - attention - an attempt to get the other person's attention by physically contacting the person (e.g., if a child tapped on the parent's arm in order to be noticed)

3 - negative touch - physical contact involving an outward pushing motion (e.g., get away), touching while reprimanding (e.g., no, don't do that)

4 - help - an assist or aid-related touch (e.g., moving a child's hand to help set up a toy)

5 - object - treating the other person as if he/she were an object (e.g., pushing off the parent in order to stand up, using another person for support, using person's hand for a tool).

Two coders analyzed all videotapes and recorded instances of touch. Then each touch was coded for type and for duration (in seconds). Coders also noted who initiated the touch.

Results

Overall, a total of 468 touches were observed (228 from parents to children, and 240 from children to parents). Of the 40 parents observed, only three (2 mothers, 1 father) did not touch children at all. The total number of touches from the other 37 parents ranged from 1 to 36, with a mean of 5.55. For children, the mean was 6.0 with a range of 1 to 39.

Table 1 shows the use of function categories by parents.

Parents use touching most often to "help" or to "comfort" their children. There was a trend for parents to touch boys more than girls across all function categories, except comfort, where fathers touched boys and girls about equally. Fathers used the "help" touch significantly more with their sons than with their daughters ($p = .058$).

Parents and children differed in their use of the categories of touch. Parents most frequently used touch to comfort a child, followed by help. Parents never used the object category, that is, they never touched their children in order to gain some physical support for standing, etc. Table 2 shows the use of the function categories by children. Children used the object category frequently, especially towards their mothers. Children never used the "help" category in this context.

Table 3 shows the mean duration of the touches in each category. Duration was computed by dividing total duration of touches (in seconds) by the total frequency of touches for each category. Parents' comfort touches lasted the longest amount of time. For children, object related touches were the longest in duration. Children's object touches to their mothers lasted longer than object touches to fathers (4.99 seconds vs. 2.34 seconds).

Discussion

The current study examined the reasons why parents and children

touch each other, and the use of different types of touches. The results suggest that there are several different types of touches, and that the length of time a touch lasts is related to the function. Comfort touches, designed to make someone feel good or to show affection, lasted the longest for parents to children. Children themselves only used the comfort category infrequently, and they never used "help" touches. However, children made use of object-related touches; that is, they would lean on parents to gain support or a more comfortable position.

At first, it seemed that the object category indicated that children had a lack of regard for the other person. Putting your hand on someone's head in order to have support while standing, for example, seems rather impolite; it is not acceptable behavior among adults. However, it may be that children are showing some general sense of feeling comfortable with their parents, and this feeling of ease allows them to use the parent as a physical object. It would be interesting to see if children use the object category when they are with strangers. Further, using a parent as an object may be a developmental precursor to other types of touching such as comfort-related.

Different types of touches may occur in different situations. The current study was done in a laboratory playroom and there were certain situational demands. For example, we had no parents hitting

their children in this study. Yet, some physical punishment is common in American families; most likely, parents are inhibited by the videotape and the awareness that they are part of a research project. This may explain the low incidence of negative touches.

Our findings regarding sex differences in touch partially support the view that boys are socialized to use touch more than girls. Fathers were using the "help" touch more with their sons than with their daughters, perhaps reflecting a greater use of touch as an expression of power or dominance in the father-son relationship. Perdue and Conner's (1978) finding that male teachers use helping touches more with girls than with boys is not paralleled in this study. Perdue and Conner indicate that girls learn at an early age that attention from a man is received by being in a dependent relationship to him; however, our study reveals that girls do not learn this from their fathers.

Touching others is a part of nonverbal communication which is particularly relevant in adult-child interaction. We have described some types of touches; simply looking at touch without regard for the function of the touches results in a loss of information. We have also reported that children and adults have different patterns of touching, and that there are some sex differences. Implications of touch patterns for development are discussed.

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TABLE 1. USE OF FUNCTION CATEGORIES BY PARENTS

	NEGATIVE	ATTENTION	HELP	COMFORT	OBJECT
FATHER TO SON	.14	.15	.34	.37	----
MOTHER TO SON	.06	.32	.18	.46	----
FATHER TO DAUGHTER	.11	.05	.25	.59	----
MOTHER TO DAUGHTER	.07	.29	.29	.34	----

TABLE 2. USE OF FUNCTION CATEGORIES BY CHILDREN*

	NEGATIVE	ATTENTION	HELP	COMFORT	OBJECT
SON TO FATHER	.41	.01	----	.07	.50
SON TO MOTHER	.08	.02	----	.05	.84
DAUGHTER TO FATHER	.21	.14	----	.12	.53
DAUGHTER TO MOTHER	.11	.07	----	.05	.77

*TABLE REPORTS THE FREQUENCY OF OCCURRENCE DIVIDED BY THE TOTAL NUMBER OF OCCURRENCES IN EACH CATEGORY.

TABLE 3. MEAN DURATION OF TOUCHES IN EACH CATEGORY*

	NEGATIVE	ATTENTION	COMFORT	HELP	OBJECT
PARENTS TO SONS	1.15	1.15	3.44	2.36	----
PARENTS TO DAUGHTERS	3.00	1.39	3.09	1.72	----
BOYS TO PARENTS	1.09	.60	.98	----	3.06
GIRLS TO PARENTS	1.27	.70	1.75	----	4.28

*MEAN DURATION WAS COMPUTED BY DIVIDING TOTAL DURATION OF TOUCHES (IN SECONDS) BY THE TOTAL FREQUENCY OF TOUCHES FOR EACH CATEGORY.